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*The Observer*. London (UK): Oct 15, 2000. p. 12

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# The New York Times

## Just Found Online: A Man's Lost Youth

*John M. Broder.* [New York Times](#). (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: [Oct 11, 2000](#). pg. H.14

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My odyssey took me here, to Potomac, a well-heeled suburb of Washington, where the Chernier Automotive Group has opened a showroom specializing in classic and exotic cars. Having noticed the group's advertisement on the Web, I traveled to the actual lot, where I found a restored 1956 Chevy Bel Air, a 1971 Chevelle SS 454, a 1964 Corvette 327 roadster and a white '60 Caddy convertible once owned by Patrick Ewing.

There were also two Ferraris from the 80's, a Dodge Viper, a rare 1992 *Porsche* 911 America roadster and a 1974 Jaguar V-12 XKE hardtop. And they happened to have the object of every red-blooded mid-60's suburban teenager's dream -- a pristine red 1966 GTO convertible with white top and interior, console, four-speed and the 360-horsepower 389 Tripower engine. Just like the car in "Wayne's World."

Then, Mr. [Tony Fleming] said, he will negotiate a price, send the seller \$1,000 in "earnest" money, contact a shipper to arrange transport and jump on a plane. "If I've agreed to pay \$20,000, I'll take a cashier's check for \$15,000 and four \$1,000 checks," he said. "If the car doesn't match the description, I'll negotiate down the price."

[Full Text](#) (1190 words)

Copyright New York Times Company Oct 11, 2000

IT all started innocently enough. Always does. I set out cruising the Internet to see whether I could find a picture of a 1969 Olds 442 like the one I drove in high school. Or maybe a cherry-red 1966 GTO like the one the Rob Lowe character drives in "Wayne's World." What a short trip it is from innocence to obsession.

Hours on the Web (note to editors: none on company time) led me into a netherworld of classic-car collectors, club shows, inspection services, parts auctions and a whole new bag of used-car-salesmen's tricks. And I learned there are many more aficionados of late 60's muscle cars than I ever imagined -- and more pitfalls to buying old cars over the Web than I foresaw.

For example, by typing "1968 Charger R/T" into Google.com, a popular Internet search engine, you get 991 hits. Try again with "Chevy Super Sport" and you will soon find a 1970 Chevelle SS 396, green with white racing stripes, 415 original miles and the sticker still on the window. Northwest Auto Sales in Akron, Ohio, was asking \$50,000 for a car that retailed for about \$4,500 new.

The Internet can tell you how to contact the Northern New Jersey Thunderbird Association (the e-mail address is dave59bird@aol.com), as well as when and where the association's next show is being held. You can shop for a Ford Boss Mustang 302 or a Hemi Road Runner or a garish orange Pontiac GTO Judge with the hood-mounted tachometer. You can find rebuilt dual-quad carburetors for the 427 V-8 in a 1967 Ford Fairlane GT. American Collectors Insurance Inc. will provide online insurance quotes for your classic car.

The Internet opens an alluring window to this world and allows shoppers to indulge their fantasies from the comfort of their desks. But the used-car buyer's two enduring rules still apply: know what you are getting and expect to pay for it.

My odyssey took me here, to Potomac, a well-heeled suburb of Washington, where the Cherner Automotive Group has opened a showroom specializing in classic and exotic cars. Having noticed the group's advertisement on the Web, I traveled to the actual lot, where I found a restored 1956 Chevy Bel Air, a 1971 Chevelle SS 454, a 1964 Corvette 327 roadster and a white '60 Caddy convertible once owned by Patrick Ewing.

There were also two Ferraris from the 80's, a Dodge Viper, a rare 1992 ~~Porsche~~ 911 America roadster and a 1974 Jaguar V-12 XKE hardtop. And they happened to have the object of every red-blooded mid-60's suburban teenager's dream -- a pristine red 1966 GTO convertible with white top and interior, console, four-speed and the 360-horsepower 389 Tripower engine. Just like the car in "Wayne's World."

"Most of the people who come in here are living a childhood dream," said Tony Fleming, the manager of the Cherner dealership. He has seen prosperous and nostalgic middle-aged men who are looking for a socially acceptable mistress. He joked with one lascivious customer who was fondling a six-speed 1999 Corvette, telling him he should have the purchase "blessed" by his wife and then return with his checkbook.

"These cars are so cool," said Mr. Fleming, with the low-key manner of an accomplished car salesman. "It's not like I'm selling some false dream."

He uses the Internet, along with newspaper classified advertisements and specialty publications like Hemmings Motor News, to look for cars for his dealership. Unlike some other dealers, he does not search for specific cars for individual buyers; he looks only at cars in good shape that can be put in near-show condition with a minimum of work.

He noted one pitfall of car shopping on the Internet: the photographs are undated. The posted image of that immaculate 1966 Thunderbird Landau in someone's driveway in Tennessee could have been taken in 1985 -- or 1966.

The first thing Mr. Fleming does when buying a car long distance is to ask the seller to buy a disposable camera, take photographs of the car inside and out, then send him the undeveloped film. That way, he can begin to get a picture of the car's condition. Mr. Fleming might then send an inspector to take a more detailed look at the car, checking whether the engine and chassis numbers match, the quality of the bodywork, the condition of the engine, the state of the interior trim. He looks for documentation for rebuilt and restoration work, a list of options and evidence that the paint matches an original factory color.

Then, Mr. Fleming said, he will negotiate a price, send the seller \$1,000 in "earnest" money, contact a shipper to arrange transport and jump on a plane. "If I've agreed to pay \$20,000, I'll take a cashier's check for \$15,000 and four \$1,000 checks," he said. "If the car doesn't match the description, I'll negotiate down the price."

His final piece of advice: "Buy the very best car you can afford. Unless you're a professional, don't buy something to fix up. It will cost you a fortune, and no amateur has ever made money restoring a car and reselling it."

COMPANIES that specialize in used-car inspections can also be found on the Internet. Buyer Services International of Hartford, (www.buyclassiccars.com), has been in business since 1992, offering to find specific cars, performing detailed inspections, arranging transport and importing overseas. The company's Web site has links to a dozen other sites that are essentially nationwide classified advertisements for classic cars. Jeff Webster, the president of Buyer Services, encourages potential buyers to study the advertisements, buy books about the model in which they are interested, attend car shows, talk to owners of the marque and get a sense of the value of prime examples of the car.

Or you can leave all that to him. "People come to me and say they have \$25,000 and want a Jaguar XKE," he said. "We'll find the car, have it inspected and present a report to the customer. Once our inspectors are through, you will have absolutely no doubt about the condition of the car." Mr. Webster's fee is based on a percentage of the purchase price, about 10 percent for most cars, less for higher-priced models.

"Our buyers have a dream, and they want a toy," Mr. Webster said. "But at the end of the day, there is always a risk. That's why we say if you buy a car long distance, assume the worst."

But at Cherner's lot in Potomac, you can ogle the sheet metal in the flesh. The '66 GTO beckons, a piece of lost youth in candy-apple red and chrome. Drive it away for only \$29,900.

It's tempting, tempting. . . . But then I remember that at the end of "Wayne's World," it's Wayne (played by Mike Myers) who gets the girl. He drove a baby blue AMC Pacer of uncertain vintage.

#### [Photograph]

At the Cherner Automotive Group, Michael Hughes of Alexandria, Va., is next to a Chevy Chevelle and looking into a Pontiac GTO.; Michael Hughes at the wheel of a Chevy Chevelle, the dream of aficionados. (Photographs by Justin Lane for The *New York Times*)

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